



USAID
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KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

SUCCESS STORY

Learning Critical Thinking, Changing the Future

Democracy Camp participants experience a culture of empowerment, urging them to improve their future



Photos: IFES

Participants in the 2010 Democracy Camps work on and present their projects. The projects engage students to think about problems they can resolve through critical thinking and team work, developing leadership skills and challenging their ability to think creatively.



The USAID-funded Democracy Camp project instills leadership values in students, creating a desire in young people to be the change they want to see in Kyrgyzstan. "Now I am not waiting for my future, I am making it by myself."

**– Ermek Abdykalykov,
2010 Democracy Camp**

U.S. Agency for International Development
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Kyrgyzstan has a disproportionately large population of young people who were born following the break-up of the former Soviet Union. They have grown up in a state that, while democratic in principle, has been plagued by corruption. Young people, who may value democratic principles in theory, understandably become disillusioned by the reality in which they live. Ways to counter these experiences include offering an example of what it looks like when you are a civically engaged, motivated individual in a country where political and administrative systems work. This experience is provided in a summer camp setting for high school age students.

Since 2000, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), funded by USAID, has worked with Kyrgyz youth to show them an alternative future through a variety of projects including the Democracy Camps. The popularity and success of the camps is evident in the large alumni network of camp participants and the initiatives they are engaged in, as well as the large number of applicants wishing to attend the camps every summer. In 2010, IFES received over 1,000 applications for 161 slots.

The main theme underscoring the camp experience is self-determination through democratic values. The camp's participants are asked to formulate questions, to present concerns and ideas, and to discuss and debate. They are taught advocacy skills needed to challenge other students to join them in their mission to improve their schools and communities. The participants learn about elections and democratic institutions by holding mock elections and establishing a system of governance. By the end of the 10-day session, the camp's participants select a project which they will take back and introduce to their schools. Many choose to initiate student governments and hold elections. IFES staff offers follow-up support to these projects.

The April 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan paved the way for a new form of parliamentary government and fomented a sense of hope for the future. While Kyrgyzstan has gone through challenging times since then, it is finding its path towards a more stable democracy. The youth who participate in the Democracy Camp program are prepared to face various challenges and take the next steps in securing a brighter future for Kyrgyzstan.